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ABSTRACT

Four articles deal with approaches to style, the usefulness of contemporary literature, the danger of dogmas, and the place of technical writing in composition courses. Louis T. Milic discusses three "real theories of style"--classical rhetorical dualism, psychological monism, and Crocean aesthetic monism--and the effect of the theories on the teaching of composition. Thomas W. Wilcox, who takes up the difficulty of teaching structural form in composition when both teacher and students are confronted with the open-ended or deliberately ambiguous structures of successful contemporary literature, indicates that teachers may have to modify their concepts of composition if they incorporate "fresh examples of verbal art" in their courses. A. M. Tibbetts presents "a short history of dogma and nonsense in the composition course." Specific dogmas discussed are semantics, communication skills, linguistics, and composition research. W. Earl Britton discusses four definitions of technical writing and differentiates between "imaginative" and "functional" writing through an emphasis on technical writing's "effort to limit the reader to one interpretation." (LH)

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Theories of Style and Their Implications for the Teaching of Composition— and Other Essays

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Theories of Style and Their Implications for the Teaching of Composition

LOUIS T. MILIC

IN THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH, the term *style* comes up far too often, I think. The teacher tinkers with the student's style in something like the way an old-fashioned doctor, an empiric, tinkered with his patient's organs, using surgery, bleeding, and drugs, haphazardly and without reference to a general theory of health or illness. The net result is often that ascribed by Lesage to the famous Dr. Sangrado, who reduced many a healthy man to the last extremity. The precise applicability of this analogy I shall not insist on pointing out, but therapy old and new has always required theoretical foundation if it was to be useful to more than one patient.

A theory of style, therefore, would seem to be an important need for any teacher of composition, though this is hardly ever made clear. In fact, a teacher of composition (like any teacher) must also have a theory of learning, but in this too it is unlikely that the beginner at least has much idea of what his theory is or could state it formally. Those who undertake the teaching of composition in college have not usually had courses in educational psychology or learning theory, behaviorist or other. Yet they obviously operate on the basis of some intuitive theory of how learning takes place. The sources of this intuition have a rather unscientific and disorderly appearance. The most potent is surely imitation of one's own learning experience and of one's own teachers. A certain amount of theory is also quarried from commonplaces with the force of received truths: practice makes perfect; if you don't work hard, how do you expect to learn, etc. . . Information may be picked up from one's colleagues or articles in *Harpers* about the sorry state of American education or in *College English* about the dangers of teaching machines and programmed instruction.

There is no guarantee that this miscellaneous collection of data could profitably be replaced by systematic training in the psychology of learning: teachers required to take such courses are not notably more successful than their untrained colleagues. It is probable that the ingredients of the theory informally held by most teachers, consisting of demonstration, repetition and examination, are as effective as anything more sophisticated would be, in view of our more or less general ignorance of the factors constituting the process of learning. Since it is not certainly known what would be better than intuition, it is perhaps just as well that time is not wasted on acquiring methods that might prove fallacious. Surely, the main reason why theory is at a discount here is that students, almost regardless of the obstacles interposed by the teacher, cannot be prevented from learning. It is in their natures to learn and this is just as true in composition as in other subjects, as was evidenced in one experiment which showed that students taking physics instead of composition improved as much in composition in their first term in college as students exposed to the regular freshman course. But this should not be taken to imply that students cannot be helped to learn faster or better.

If we are to take the Kitzhaber report seriously, nothing can help; there is no

agreement on what good composition is, nor what the subject matter of courses ought to be, nor about the texts, teachers, grades or anything else, except that the level of writing must be brought up. In view of the seriousness of the situation, I am reluctant to call attention to what seems to me a fundamental deficiency of all the approaches to this problem. No consistent theory of style seems to underlie the several efforts to teach composition. By this I mean that the relationship of thing to idea and idea to word is left unexpressed, to be interpreted according to the fashion of the moment. Whatever interpretation is favored, the consequences are formidable for the related question: to what extent and by what means can the writing behavior of the student be influenced to change. It is obvious that the choice between a stylistic monism and dualism will give vastly different answers and consequently imply vastly different strategies for dealing with our patients.

Though I may be accused of being precipitous in thinking of a college freshman as possessed of a mind and personality in some degree formed, I am speaking advisedly. The problem is clearly different in the earlier formative stages, in grammar school and in high school, when the material is still plastic. But in college we have on our hands a rather intractable entity, chock-full of habits with the force of a dozen years of practice. Thus, in a sense, the problem may be insoluble before we address ourselves to it.

There are only three real theories of style, though there has been much embroidery on the basic fabric. The most familiar is the theory of ornate form, or rhetorical dualism. From the classical rhetoricians who originated it to the rhetoricians of the moment who are still using it, this dualism view has always implied that ideas exist wordlessly and can be dressed in a variety of outfits, depending on the need for the occasion: the grand style, the plain style, the middle style and the low style and the like.

A second theory, the individualist or psychological monism, which finds its most common expression in the aphorism that the style is the man, may have originally sprung from Plato's conception of the *vir bonus*, the good man whose goodness would express itself equally in graceful dancing and graceful expression. The modern version is perhaps descended from Montaigne, who claimed to write in the way that was natural for him, following his own bent, and disdaining affectation. Brought wholly up-to-date, it means that a writer cannot help writing the way he does, for that is the dynamic expression of his personality, illustrated in his handwriting, his walk and all his activity.

The most modern theory of style, Crocean aesthetic monism, is an organic view which denies the possibility of any separation between content and form. Any discussion of style in Croce's view is useless and irrelevant, for the work of art (the composition) is a unified whole, with no seam between meaning and style. Thus, in the organic view, there is no style at all, only meaning or intuition. It is an elegant solution which has been widely adopted by enthusiasts quite unaware, it seems, that it left them nothing to do. It is so widespread that those who practice it hardly find it necessary even to say that style is not an isolable quality.

Now, how do these recondite theories affect us as teachers of composition? Although the connection between the dabblings of our freshmen and the ideas of Plato and Croce may seem remote, the implications of these theories have important consequences for the teaching of composition. It is in the nature of basic theories to generate implications and for opposed theories to produce contradictory implications. Thus it is evi-

dent that eclecticism will not really work and that a choice among these theories must be made by the teacher of composition. He cannot espouse one theory and teach on the basis of another, or, like many a handbook of composition, a conflation of all three.

If the teacher adopts the theory of ornate form, he must be prepared to accept—even to hail enthusiastically—its inevitable implications. The theory is based, as everyone knows, on the belief in the separate existence of content and form. Like any frankly dualistic view, it has attracted the disapproval of those who espouse a hard (or positivist) line. That is, though you can see words, you cannot see ideas or content. If you cannot see (feel, hear, etc.) content, you have no proof that it exists. What you cannot prove the existence of, they say, you have no business theorizing about. Yet, despite its unprovability and perhaps its scientific unsoundness, the dualistic theory has many attractions and advantages. But its implications must be accepted or at least accounted for.

To begin with, the disjunction of content and form permits a belief in a real intended meaning behind every utterance. The writer intends to express something (idea) and he struggles with possibilities until he finds the formulation which best expresses it. Because this seems to many to correspond with every writer's experience, it is readily accepted by everyone, including the critically naive, who proceed to sew it onto one of the monistic theories. Pedagogically, this makes it possible to enjoin the student to clarify his thought (without reference to the possible difficulty that this may be impracticable without the aid of language), to make it logical, before actually embodying it in words. The inelegancies and errors which occur can be treated as correctable by consulting the intended meaning. Correction and revision are done according to some absolute standard of rightness perhaps related to the hierarchy of styles: casual, informal, formal, ceremonial (also known as levels of usage). And if revision and correction are done sufficiently long and diligently, the expression of the intended meaning can become complete. It can reach the point where the reaction of a reader would be "There seems to be no other way to say it."

It should be evident that this theory of style corresponds pretty well with the practices of the old rhetoric. The theory of rhetorical dualism justifies certain classroom procedures. Students can be encouraged to write imitations of Swift, Addison, Johnson, Macaulay, Shaw or E. B. White. They can be set to write the same paper in a variety of styles, from the low to the grand. They can be taught the mysteries of anaphora, brachylogia, hypallage and epichireme. Their compositions can be tested for the suitable presence of the seven parts, from exordium to peroration. But, conversely, emphasis on subject and on personality must be excluded. Students should not be told to write naturally, to express their personalities, that is, because such a concept contradicts the fundamental assumptions of the theory of ornate form. Nor should any particular attention be paid to the substance of the writing for the theory explicitly denies any link between substance and form except for logic. The uniformity of the writing of the students which might result must be taken as a vindication of the theory and not as an evil consequence.

If the second theory, the individualist, is espoused, the field of activity is greatly narrowed. In Plato's view, the only route to the improvement of the student's writing (or dancing) is through the general enhancement of his soul. If we wish the writing to be good—Plato believes in an absolute standard—the

writer must be a good person. Nothing else will avail. Thus courses in composition would become largely courses in spiritual self-improvement, perhaps with ethics, religion and psychotherapy as significant components. In the more modern version of this theory, that style is the expression of the student's mind and personality, there is not much more to do. We can exhort him to eschew mannerism and to write naturally, to express himself fully and to be as grammatical as possible while doing it. But what if the student's personality, fully expressed, leads to contortion, gibberish or paranoia? What is left except to throw up our hands? It is evident that under the influence of this theory we cannot urge the student to adopt another personality or to write more naturally than he does when his natural writing is not bearable. None of the usual tactics used in composition courses have any real bearing here except perhaps finding a subject on which the student can perform competently.

Croce's organic theory of style leaves us even more completely helpless, inasmuch as it explicitly disavows any segmentation between the subject and its form. Croce will have no truck with devices of rhetoric or anything which casts the least shadow on the integrity of expression. The consequences of the disappearance of style which results is that discussion of the student's writing must consist almost exclusively of its philosophy, so to speak. The emphasis which this theory forces on us is the dominance of the subject. For if there is no form, we cannot discuss, much less improve, the student's means of expression. The powerful trend to the study of linguistics and substantive matters in composition courses of late years may find its source in the unconscious adoption of this unitary view. If we cannot teach rhetoric, we must still teach something, but since miscellaneous social and topical subjects have produced no improvement, perhaps the final recourse to the subject matter of the language itself will succeed. Thus the proponents of the linguistic readers have in a way solved the Crocean paradox. Substance cannot be separated from form but if the substance *is the form* we can have the best of both worlds, writing exclusively about form. However ingenious this solution may seem, there is very little evidence that it has succeeded in improving the level of performance in English composition, if a nascent counter-trend to the linguistic approach is any guide, not to mention the shortage of qualified instructors.

It is unfortunately true that composition theory has been going in circles for the last two or three decades and that the level of composition among freshmen has been declining. Those who refer to the good old days are usually rebuffed with sociological facts, such as the greater percentage of students in college now compared to half a century ago. As the base broadens, the average must go down. This is doubtless true, but it is not the entire answer. That, I believe must be sought in an unhappy confusion in the minds of the teachers of composition. These unfortunates, beginning some three or four decades ago, threw rhetoric into the wastebasket, partly under the stimulus of the new Crocean discovery and partly under the influence of factors which also resulted in the dismissal of Latin from the curriculum, and were left with nothing to teach. Until about 1920, composition texts were rhetorics. After that, they became almost everything else, with results that have horrified all observers. The combination of the individualist theory — Write naturally! — and the organic theory — Content and form are inseparable! — has become a talisman so powerful that only scorn is reserved for

those who would profess to doubt its magic power. In fact, it is considered a truth so self-evident that it hardly needs to be stated and thus it underlies the thinking of all or nearly all those who teach composition by any method, even the new rhetoricians.

The welter of theories and panaceas currently ornamenting the composition scene results, I believe, from this fundamental theoretical unsoundness: form cannot be taught by those who do not believe in it and the creative expression of personality cannot be interpreted as a reasonable compromise between form and substance. If we want to teach something in our composition classes, it may be that we must return to some form of rhetoric, which is honestly and unashamedly concerned with form and not with content. It seems to have evaded the scrutiny of interested parties that the decline in composition has not been a feature of educational systems still backwardly tied to old-fashioned rhetorical methods, including Italy, France, Germany, Spain and England. Perhaps there is a lesson in this.

A distinction may need to be made, also, between the best theory of style for teaching composition and the best theory for analyzing literary works. For teaching, a dualistic theory seems to be essential, at least in the early stages, until the maturing of the literary personality has had an opportunity to influence the student's style. For analysis, the problem is somewhat different. A fusion of expressive and unconscious theories seems to conform to the general practice. Writers, that is, write in a certain way because they select the most effective artifices of expression, but also because they are unconsciously bound to the requirements of individual personality.

The monistic view of style, therefore, cannot be allowed to infect the teaching of our subject, for it vitiates all the available pedagogical resources of rhetoric. In the college composition course, which represents for most students their first formal training in rhetoric, an awareness must be instilled of the existence of alternatives, of different ways of saying the same thing, of the options that the language offers. In this task, the perhaps exhausted vein of the old rhetoric may need a transfusion from the new. To aid instruction in the mechanism of expression, a systematic study of linguistics (rather than a helter-skelter travelogue) may also have a significant place. At the moment, however, only the direction of the journey is clear: the details of the itinerary are waiting to be discovered.

Columbia University

Composition Where None Is Apparent: Contemporary Literature and the Course in Writing

THOMAS W. WILCOX

WE ARE TOLD by Milton's Raphael that to complete the ur-composition – that which all of us and our students have been simulating ever since–God "conglob'd / Like things to like, the rest to several place / Dispart'd . . ." The meaning of these lines in the seventh book of *Paradise Lost*–and particularly of that intriguing word "conglob'd"–may be debated, but I understand them to say that at that precise moment God established correspondences, instituted coherence, and thus in effect sanctioned Freshman English as it is taught today. Most of our textbooks, most of our assignments, and most of our discussions in this course are directed towards instructing students to "conglobe" their thoughts and experiences into verbal constructs which partake of an order and coherence we assume to be apparent in life itself. Indeed, had they only been in print at the time He faced His great task, God might have followed these directions for composition offered in a recent and entirely typical rhetoric:

> The first step [here the words "in writing an expository paper" occur, but God would have understood them to mean something more] . . . is to assemble the raw material. The second step is to sort out and select. The third step is to develop each major idea in detail. The fourth step is to work out clearly the underlying principle of organization, to give the work both inner unity and outer coherence. [And of course the final step is to proofread the work. This God did when he surveyed his creation and saw that it was good.][1]

It should not surprise us that this prescription for composition describes so exactly both the original act of authorship as it has traditionally been imagined and the auctorial labors of today's freshmen. Whether or not our assumptions are theological, we continue to insist that our students produce miniature cosmos every time they write. In short, we conceive composition almost exclusively as an act of ordering, of fashioning coherent structures, of perceiving and replicating harmonious wholes.

Those of us who think it legitimate to incorporate some study of literature into the course in writing–and I am aware that there are many, like Albert Kitzhaber, who consider it an adulteration to do so–often justify this practice by asserting that to perceive design and the completion of form in a poem, novel or play is fit preparation for the task of constructing well designed non-literary compositions. It is a principle in our theory of literature–a theory of literature which many of us acquired from the critics of the thirties and which we have repeatedly tested to our satisfaction on selected literary texts–it is a principle with us that literary works of value exhibit closed patterns, that they include

[1] Hans Guth, *Words and Ideas: A Handbook for College Writing* (San Francisco, 1959), p. 528.

no extraneous matter, that they construe and indeed control experience by containing it in well designed artifacts. Wallace Stevens' "Anecdote of the Jar" has been our favorite fable, and we have thought it entirely proper to promise our students that their ability to place jars in the wilderness of their own thoughts and observations would surely be enhanced by learning to apprehend coherent structure in literature. In our more euphoric moods we have even boasted that training in defining form in literature is training for finding order and meaning in life. Thus, William Van O'Connor asserts in one of his textbooks:

> Significant literature enlarges our understanding of the world, of human relationships, of the human situation. Because it creates a world apart from the disordered flow of daily existence it can give us an intensified sense of the physical world, of human emotions, and of conflicts. A sensitive and careful reading of good literature can do much to sharpen our own perception and awareness of the world around us.[2]

And Reuben Brower defends the techniques of analysis he practices so well in his semi-pedagogical text, *The Fields of Light,* by declaring that:

> Practice in defining the meanings of words in literature is an "instrument of liberal culture" since it is practice in making discriminations. Practice in discovering the "masses of implications" in a work of literary art is practice in finding relationships, in finding order in experience.[3]

To this we need only add that finding order in experience is the first step in fashioning well ordered prose, the goal of our freshman course.

It is obvious that our choice of literary texts for that course, as it is now taught, must be determined very largely by our desire to help our students to find significant forms, again on the assumption that to discern such forms is to learn to fabricate coherently formed non-literary statements. Thus, we have read with our students—often examined rather than read, I am afraid—such literature as the poems of Donne, in which complex but nicely closed patterns may be traced; the plays of Chekhov, where everything, we are assured, has its place and contributes to the meaning of the whole; and the stories of Joyce, which are so hermetic as to induce in Frank O'Connor a feeling "akin to claustrophobia." Most recently we have been seduced—and many of us think that is the right word—by the well wrought, neatly composed, but finally rather shallow parable, *Lord of the Flies.* We want the tidy, readily explicable text, whose strategy may be divined by freshmen and the predictable completion of whose form must be apparent even to the junior critic; how nice to find one which seems both topical and profound, which alludes to both the atom bomb and the fall of man within a structure which can be diagrammed on the board. We want such texts, and we seize them with perhaps uncritical relish when they appear, because we are committed to demonstrating an analogy – indeed, a continuum—between literature and what is called, by default, "expository prose." Often we take our own assumption for granted and simply blend the two, as when Professor Booth refers to the "rhetoric of fiction" and when Professors Martin and Ohmann give the following instructions for composing the paragraph, in their latest rhetoric:

> The paragraph is a scene from a play. As a separate scene, it has characters and action; as one of many scenes in the play, it has some meaning and function beyond itself. The writer is playwright. His concern is to make the scene-para-

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[2] *Modern Prose: Form and Style* (New York, 1959), p. 426.
[3] New York, 1951, p. xii.

> graph represent something that is happening. That means distinguishing actor from action from acted-upon. It means supplying sufficient matter to give the action appropriate size; it means providing motivation and sequence and result. It means forecasting and concluding and connecting.[4]

Now, let us infer a play from this sustained metaphor—extricate its vehicle from its tenor, as they used to say. What kind of a play would it be? What kind of a play *must* it be to provide an analogue for paragraphs of the kind Martin and Ohmann want their students to fashion? Well, clearly it must be a play in which early events "forecast" those to come, in which all parts are logically connected, and in which a continuous action leads inexorably to a definite conclusion or "result." Only such a play would make a proper paragraph, only such a play would illustrate the principle of composition these rhetoricians are promoting. And it is plays of this type we seek when we think to introduce some dramatic literature into our course in writing.

But suppose we look about us today to find in the serious literature of our own age dramatic works which meet this description. We might want to do so, if only because we might wish to provide our students with living specimens for analysis. We might also feel an obligation—and probably we *should* feel such an obligation—to put our faith in the value of literature as an instrument for teaching composition to the test of contemporaneity. For we may suspect that if contemporary literature provides no models for use in our course, if our techniques of analysis seem to work only on the literature of the past and not on that of the present, it may no longer be possible to pretend that men use the same tactics and devices to represent experience in literature as they do to represent and interpret it in expository prose. In short, we may be forced to admit either that our methods for teaching composition and the principles those methods imply are obsolete or that the writings we require from our students will bear little resemblance to the writings of our leading poets, novelists and playwrights—those whose works we instinctively feel merit our serious attention.

When we conduct such a search, all eager to find in contemporary literature continuing justification for our insistence on order and coherent form, we are appalled to discover that *almost no* works of literature which may be called authentically of the present fit the formula for good composition we commend to our students. Almost *none* of them exhibits a closed design, almost none "provides motivation and sequence and result" (to recall Martin and Ohmann's phrase) expressed in logical structures which students may emulate to produce compositions of the kind we reward with our "A's." Indeed, if we were perfectly consistent and honest, we should have to write, "Incoherent (see page 234 of the handbook)" in the margins of nine tenths of the literature offered us today. And what ought to be most disturbing to us is the flat assertion of so many contemporary writers – *our* contemporaries, mind you, and like us custodians of the word – that they *mean* to be incoherent, that only by *de*-composing, only by shattering forms and violating conventions and exploding language can they express their vision of life today.

Let us continue for a moment to limit our search to the drama. Would Professors Martin and Ohmann (whom I am belaboring unjustly, I know) suggest to their students that they bear in mind, as they write their paragraphs, these words of the contemporary playwright, Eugene Ionesco?

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[4] Harold C. Martin and Richard M. Ohmann, *The Logic and Rhetoric of Exposition* (New York, 1963), pp. 206-207.

> A play is a structure which consists of a series of states of consciousness, which become intensified, grow more and more dense, then get entangled, either to be disentangled again or to end in unbearable inextricability.[5]

A paragraph may be a play, but to satisfy the demands of our freshman course it cannot be *that* kind of a play: a play in which unrelated events occur in random series, in which meaning is obscured or wanting entirely, and in which nothing but "unbearable inextricability" results. Yet this is precisely the kind of play Ionesco and others are giving us today; and we have learned to respect—almost to *e*xpect—these deliberately confused but somehow authentic images of contemporary experience. Not to read such works with our students would be to suppress important evidence, to deny them opportunities (I'm quoting William Van O'Connor again) "to sharpen [their] perception and awareness of the world around [*them*]." But I do not see how we can hope to derive from such literature principles and precepts of rhetoric which, when applied, will conduce to the well ordered essay which still seems to be the primary desideratum of our course. We have been fond in the past of quoting as part of our remarks on the need for planning and strict pertinency in such essays Chekhov's famous aphorism, "You must never put a loaded rifle on the stage if no one is going to fire it." In the plays we must now discuss with our students that gun may fire only blanks—*or* it may be turned on the audience.

It might almost seem that this literature was written deliberately to subvert the purposes of our course, and so it was in the sense that it is dedicated to frustrating expectations and denying conclusions. Much of modern literature, dramatic and otherwise, has just this intention. Thus we have "open-ended" parables, characterized, as Richard Eastman has said, by a "designed instability" which prevents verification of meaning or even of significant relationships. We have fictions of total ambiguity or of totally equivocal narration. We have celebrations of the gratuitous act, for which no justification can be found and which results in utterly unpredictable consequences. We have novels, plays and films in which realism dissolves into fantasy and fantasy seems terrifyingly realistic; in which all is various, abberrant, and uncircumscribed; and in which anti-heroes wander senselessly in nightmares of anti-form. Whether we like them or not, whether we accept or reject the view of life they convey, these are the works, this is the literature we now *have*; and everything about it would seem to contradict rather than affirm the principles of language and of composition we have confidently endorsed for decades.

Consider, as a single illustration, the matter of conclusions—or what one modern dramatist has taught us to call the "endgame." Every rhetoric with which I am familiar counsels students to conclude their compositions with finality, and most of these textbooks urge this doctrine in words such as these from the Perrin-Smith handbook:

> The purpose of the conclusion is to round out the subject and to give final emphasis to the paper. The last paragraph should sound like an ending, so that the person who reads it will know you have finished your paper and have not merely abandoned it. . . The reader will know he has come to the end if the final paragraph ties together the ideas you have been developing and emphasizes the main point of the paper, or, in

[5] "Printemps 1939. Les Débris du Souvenir. Pages de Journal," *Cahiers Renaud-Barrault*, XXIX (February, 1960), 231. As quoted in Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (New York, 1961), p. 132.

> a narrative sounds like the conclusion of the action.[6]

Once again, the emphasis is on "rounding out," on containing and sealing the composition. But it is notable that few conclusions of this sort are to be found in contemporary literature. There an ending is likely to be merely a cessation, or it may be contrived to imply an endless recurrence of the previous action. Thus, Beckett's Estragon says in the final moments of *Waiting for Godot,* "I can't go on like this," to which his partner replies, "That's what you think" as they begin the *aria da capo* with which the play ends but does not conclude. And Max Brod writes in a perceptive comment of Kafka's *The Trial,* "In a certain sense the novel could never be terminated—that is to say, it could be prolonged into infinity,"[7] because Joseph K. was never to get as far as the highest court, and since his quest was infinite and by definition impossible to complete, the form of the novel could never be completed, its design never closed. Or rather, it could be closed only in the way Kafka chose to close it: by meaningless annihilation, in this case of his principal character. The "open-endedness" of these works must not be dismissed as mere manifestations of caprice or lack of craft: the fact is that the vision of man's lot these authors had to express is simply not susceptible to "conglobing," to rounding out in the manner we prescribe in our course in writing.

Nor is there much solace to be had, I think, in saying as Professor Booth does when he discusses literature of this kind, "Even the loosest, least conclusive of works is to some degree an ordered, or at least a selected, whole. And certainly those open structures which we admire always turn out, on close inspection, to be 'open' only in very limited respects; in so far as we can think of them as great works, they somehow weave their various threads into a final harmony."[8] What consolation can there be, if consolation is needed, in the realization that the artist *must* delimit his picture, the play *must* end after some period of time, and the novel *must* have a last chapter if everything within those works testifies to a militant effort to confound forms and to avoid conventional structures? Accommodating contemporary literature in this way is rather like patting an anarchist on the head and saying, "You vote because you do not vote, and thus you are one of us after all," a practice which must infuriate both anarchist and writer because it implies a refusal to take them and their works for what they are. It also implies a certain cravenness on our part and an almost obsessive need to find "a final harmony" in all the works we read.

Surely it were more candid simply to recognize that such harmony cannot be found in, must be imposed on much of the literature our serious writers offer us today. How we can then reconcile this realization with the procedure of our freshman course, I am not now prepared to say. I have yet to write my grammar of ambiguity and my rhetoric of existentialism. Nor do I propose that we establish a Summer Institute in the Absurd. It seems clear to me, however, that something must be done, some strenuous and imaginative efforts must be made to effect such a reconciliation if we are not to abandon the reading of pertinent literature as we teach our students to write, or if the assignments we impose on them are not to degenerate into mere artificial exercises, like the prolusions schoolboys contrived in the seventeenth century. I know of only one

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[6] Porter G. Perrin and George H. Smith, *The Perrin-Smith Handbook of Current English* (Chicago, 1962), p. 359.

[7] "Postscript to the First Edition." Trans. and reprinted in the Modern Library Edition of *The Trial,* p. 334.

[8] *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago, 1961), p. 298n.

textbook—Walker Gibson's fine little anthology, *The Limits of Language*—which provides materials for a trenchant study of the relation of contemporary literature to contemporary prose. We will need many more like it, and we will need many teachers willing to modify their concepts of composition if we are to continue to enrich our course with fresh examples of verbal art.

After all, even Milton could describe the central paragraph in God's great work as "A Wilderness of sweets . . . Wilde above rule or art." Perhaps it is time we took our eyes off Stevens' jar and looked more deeply into his wilderness.

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A Short History of Dogma and Nonsense in the Composition Course

A. M. TIBBETTS

> *But when a Man's Fancy gets* astride *on his Reason, when Imagination is at Cuffs with the Senses, and common Understanding, as well as common Sense, is Kickt out of Doors; the first Proselyte he makes, is Himself, and when that is once compass'd, the Difficulty is not so great in bringing over others; A strong Delusion always operating from* without, *as vigorously as from* within. (Jonathan Swift, "A Digression on Madness," *A Tale of a Tub* (Oxford, 1958), p. 171.)

SINCE WORLD WAR II, teachers of composition have had to endure an extraordinary amount of dogma and nonsense that has been sprayed over the composition course by the theologians of communication. Teachers have been afflicted by the fancies of semanticists, communications skillists, and linguisticians, singly and *en masse*. They have been pragmatized, scientificated, and sometimes nearly obliterated. Many, if not most, teachers got used to this and learned not to pay excessive attention to the parade of delusions about the teaching of writing. Like street cars, a new delusion came along every hour.

But a new generation of composition teachers is coming out of the graduate school. The bad old days are past, and the new generation is innocent and unwary. The times appear relatively free of freshly printed manifestoes, and to the uninitiated it might seem possible to teach an eighteen-year-old to write English without at the same time teaching him listening, speed-reading, and dating habits in Borneo. However, theologies die, only to rise again. Since knowledge is power, I here offer a short history of the recent theologies of communication. It is wise to understand and to be prepared, for one never knows when he may awake in the morning to find a new dogma on his linguistic doorstep, snarling and baring its phonemic fangs.

I

Semantics was the first dogma to become widespread after the war. It was also the least objectionable. It provided an easy way to teach the difference between the cold meaning of a word and its psychological coloring or implication. It had a masterful popularizer in S. I. Hayakawa, from whose *Language in Thought and Action* (1949) semantic notions were borrowed by textbook writers for a decade.

Valuable as his ideas often were, Hayakawa made the fundamental error of the dogmatist. He claimed too much. He took a partial truth about the symbolism and logic of language and tried to turn it into a *Weltanschauung*. In the "Foreword" to his book, he wrote of bringing together the disciplines of linguistics, philosophy, psychology, cultural anthropology, physiology, neurology, mathematical biophysics, and cybernetics by using "some set of broad and informing principles such as is to be found in the General Semantics of Korzybski" (p. vi). Hayakawa's implication was that semantics could be used to solve many of the problems of human existence.

Teachers soon discovered that semantics could not deal directly with these problems because they are in kind not so much linguistic as religious and moral.

Semanticists usually dealt in words rather than in good and bad actions. They thought that they could change men by changing words—ironically, in holding this belief they violated one of their favorite tenets: not to be fooled by word magic. For it is not enough to make men into good users of words; they must also be made into good men. Semanticists, being logical positivists rather than moralists, had no devices in their bag for making men good. It shortly became apparent that they did not even know it was necessary to make men good.

Semanticists tried to be cold, scientific, and objective about matters that are religious, moral, esthetic, and mysterious. Like many theologians, whether secular or religious, they found their work passed over and ignored because it could not explain the infinite variety of life and art. The man who asked, "What is Truth?" sometimes got nonsense in return: *The map is not the territory,* or *It is necessary to have a multi-valued orientation.* And all of us who took (or taught) semantics remember that crushing rejoinder from a member of the priesthood: "But you're not speaking *semantically*!"

When we tried to teach semantics in the composition course, we soon found that it did little good and occasionally much harm. The student who used words poorly did so because he used words vaguely, emptily, pompously, or imprecisely. Semantics usually could not help him. In teaching logic and reasoning, the use of semantics merely proved to be taking the long road around. If an error in logic appeared in a student's writing, we found it better to attack it directly than to appeal to semantic jargon, which befuddled matters. A few teachers took the dogma of semantics seriously and taught it as the Sevenfold Way, turning their classes into shrines dedicated to the tyranny of words. Their students could orally discuss the affective language of Hitler with alarming precocity, but ordinarily they couldn't write worth sour apples, having never been taught to.

Semantics in the composition course perished some time in the 1950's. Its place in the theology of communication was taken by one of the silliest doctrines ever to exist in American education—communication skills. The communication skillist worked according to the First Law of Trivia, which says: "The more ridiculous the idea, the more enthusiastically people will try to put it into practice." To the simple three-hour writing course an army of pedagogues added speaking skills, reading skills, listening skills, studying skills, and using-audio-visual-aids skills. The student wrote themes on dating and marital problems. He read newspapers and magazines, saw movies and TV plays, and discoursed on the "media of communication."

For the experimentally minded, it was the best of times. There were clinics, reading labs, writing labs, and speaking labs. A student could get his lisp removed at the speech clinic in the morning, and in the afternoon he might learn to read the *Reader's Digest* faster and faster. Skillists experimented with ability sectioning and gave the sections important-sounding names and numbers. There were Exceptional sections, Average sections, and Remedial sections. The Remedial students were the lucky ones; they got most of the attention. It was not a good time to be bright. Skillists taught the Remedial students spelling, outlining, paragraphs, capitals, commas, semicolons, and the use of the dictionary. It is recorded that one individualist taught the use of the colon, but he was reprimanded because the colon was not in the syllabus.

The skillists were relatively undogmatic, perhaps because they were too

busy rushing around and a dogma would only have slowed them down. They found it good to be alive in those days, but to be an administrator was very heaven. Never before in English studies had there been so much confusion to administer. In addition to all those clinics and labs and media and accelerated courses and decelerated courses, there was a testing program that threatened to make the whole thing worthwhile. The testing program operated according to the Second Law of Trivia: "Whether you can teach it or not, test it." There was a test for spelling, for outlining, for capitals, for commas, for semicolons, and for the use of the dictionary. But not one for the colon, which was not in the syllabus.

Everybody was happy with skillism but the teachers, who found their classrooms haunted by experimenters desiring to determine such matters as *The Coefficient of Listening Comprehension of* 8:00 *Tuesday-Thursday-Saturday Classes.* A teacher trying to get to the front of his classroom might stumble over an opaque projector, which didn't work and somehow managed to burn his fingers; a three-speed phonograph, with a collection of Edward R. Murrow recordings; or a spanking new tape recorder with the Dean's latest speech carefully taped into it. From administrative offices came a flurry of requests, suggestions, appeals, and blunt commands. Groaned one teacher after he had hauled out of his staff mailbox seven orders of various sizes, shapes, and colors addressed to him from four different administrators: "They are stoning me to death with little pieces of paper!"

So long as the skillist course taught theme writing, it did well enough. Rhetorically considered, some of these courses were excellent. But rhetoric was soon crowded out. There were too many persons teaching skills who knew nothing about writing. And the writing teacher could not teach speech. The teacher of speed-reading got lost and frightened when he was asked to teach anything not in the *Reader's Digest.* The blurring of professional lines tended to kill professional competence.

The most damaging piece of nonsense in the whole affair was not, so far as I can tell, invented by the skillists, although they did push it harder than anyone before them. This was ability-sectioning, which not only did not work but actually enfeebled the teaching on all levels. The Exceptional sections were full of talky and bright but sometimes woolly-minded abstractionists who badly needed the earthy and commonsensical wit of their friends who had been herded into the Average sections. The Average students needed in their own classes the very qualities that had been sectioned out into the Exceptional group. The Remedial sections needed a firing squad.[1]

Like semantics, skillism died in the 1950's. It was a busy decade. Developed also during this period (for general consumption, that is) was the most violent of the delusions under discussion—linguistics. The theology of the linguisticians[2] is too well known to need dis-

[1] Why was ability-sectioning so popular in the 1950's? Perhaps it satisfied the administrative love for classifying the unclassifiable. More likely, however, the answer is more obvious and more political. Sectioning invariably lowers the standards of the composition course, and a larger number of students could pass the Average and Remedial courses. Many state universities have pretended to drop the Remedial course. But the left hand knoweth not what the right hand doeth: a great state-supported institution has been created for the Remedial student. It is called the *junior college.*

[2] Sometimes called *linguisticists,* although this term does not make them happy (see, for example, James Sledd, "Grammar or Gramarye," *English Journal,* XLIX (May, 1960), 293-303). A philologist, who is also my friend, suggests that *linguistician* is more apt: "A rounder, fuller, and sweeter term," he says of *linguistician,* "one that befits the splendor and spirituality of their calling."

cussion here. Nor need we try to ascertain the truth of the various linguistic poses, except as they relate to the teaching of composition. It is said that many linguisticians were, and are, doing splendid work in the theory of language, comparative linguistics, dialect studies, and the like. Perhaps. In composition and rhetoric the linguistician has been a bull in a china shop.

The linguistician began by demanding that composition teaching had to be linguistically oriented, as witness this opening paragraph in Harry Warfel's "Structural Linguistics and Composition" (*CE*, XX (February, 1959), 205):

> The science of structural linguistics has put new tools into our hands. Just as nucleonics has penetrated into the minute operations of the atom, so structural linguistics has unlocked the secrets of language. The established conclusions and the emerging theories seem likely to force other disciplines to reshape current procedures wherever they are dependent upon or impinge upon language. Philosophy, logic, and psychology in particular must review much of their methodology. The teaching of composition must undergo a revolutionary change.

The composition teacher did not have to look far to find nonsense in linguistical theory. In search of a definition for a sentence, he discovered the following:

> A *sentence* is traditionally defined as a group of words which expresses a complete thought; but the definition is useless, since it does not tell us what complete thoughts may be or what forms express them. Since no useful definition can be framed to include all and only the things which are often called sentences, we have provided a definition which will be useful to writers and readers of expository prose. We identify the stretches of speech that lie between terminals, or sequences of these stretches, either as complete sentences or as sentence fragments (nonsentences). A complete sentence will always end in one of the terminals /↑/ and /↓/ (never /→/), and it may or may not contain occurrences of /↑/ or /→/ within itself; but it will also contain, in every case except that of the subjectless imperative, at least one independent combination of complete subject with complete predicate, expanded or unexpanded. (James Sledd, *A Short Introduction to English Grammar* (Chicago, 1959), pp. 246-247.)

Adapting a line from Pope, the teacher of composition might well have exclaimed of the linguistician that he "explain[s] a thing till all men doubt it."[3]

The linguistical dogmas were adhered to by true believers with exquisite tenacity. They were fond of making lists of their beliefs, and thus one saw everywhere in the canonical works numerous lists of unequivocal declarative utterances; for example: ONE, ALL LANGUAGE IS SPEECH: TWO, ALL LANGUAGE CHANGES. The theology of linguistics still customarily requires belief in these and other commandments, which are yet hashed over whenever the pious meet. Perhaps the day is not far off when a congress of exegetical linguisticians will meet to debate the question: *How many morphemes can*

[3] Samuel Johnson anticipated the linguisticians' "bugbear style," which "has more terror than danger, and will appear less formidable, as it is more nearly approached." Wrote Johnson: "A mother tells her infant, that 'two and two make four,' the child remembers the proposition, and is able to count to four to all the purposes of life, till the course of his education brings him among philosophers, who fright him for his former knowledge, by telling him that four is a certain aggregate of units; that all numbers being only the repetition of an unite, which, though not a number itself, is the parent, root, or original of all number, 'four' is the denomination assigned to a certain number of such repetitions. The only danger is, lest, when he first hears these dreadful sounds, the pupil should run away; if he has but the courage to stay till the conclusion, he will find that, when speculation has done its worst, two and two still make four" ("Idler 36," *Works* (Yale, 1963), II, 113-114).

be made to crowd on the point of a nounhead aggregate?

The composition teacher can rightly complain that linguistics has been an intrusion upon his proper domain. In its intellectual aspects, the linguistical new grammar belongs in the graduate school, where like other closed philosophical systems, it can proliferate without reference to reality. In its practical aspects, it will have to retreat to the grade school, where grammar is properly learned and forgotten. To the college composition teacher, grammar is like arithmetic, which is learned by rote in the grades and then later used unconsciously in more sophisticated operations. Teaching grammar to freshmen is rather like teaching the multiplication table to them.

II

It may be wise at this point to sum up what is known about the theology of dogma and nonsense in the composition course. The linguistician will not mind if we borrow his technique of listing vital truths:

1. The theologian is usually an outsider who wishes the insider (the composition teacher) to adopt the theologian's views.

2. The theologian is not happy being on the outside; he wants to be on the inside and run things.

3. In the theologian's views, there is a particle of truth, sometimes many particles. The truth may be hidden by a fog of nonsense, but it is there somewhere.

4. The theologian, who is addicted to theory, customarily finds reality painful.

5. The theologian is seldom satisfied with his theory and often changes it. Like the atheist who becomes a Catholic, then a Communist, then finally an atheist again, the theologian of communication may often be seen trudging from one faith to another seeking the grail of the perfect (linguistic) system. He may begin as a semanticist, later shifting to skillism, to Friesianism, to "pure" linguistics, to transformationalism—and so on. He is now jumping on the bandwagon of the "New Rhetoric," a thing as imaginary, one experienced observer of the academic scene has claimed, as the Emperor's new clothes.

6. The theologian believes in Science and Research.

Point six deserves some explanation. As we all know, to be scientific is automatically to be right and truthful. A physicist or chemist, according to popular misapprehension, cannot tell a fib or even make mistakes, for the scientific method leads unerringly to verity. Thus when the theologian pours his nonsense into the test tube of science it undergoes a sea-change into "true facts."[4] Research, so long as it is scientific, accomplishes the same thing. If the theologian of communication wants to discover anything about composition teaching, he does not ask the nearest competent teacher in the discipline but turns instead to the questionnaire and the statistician. A theologian once stated that he could not inquire of teachers because "there was no way to discover who is competent." This man is head of a large Freshman English program, and it would be amusing to know whether the president of his university is aware that an administrator responsible for half a hundred teachers is unable to determine their competence.

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[4] Philip Gove, the editor-in-chief of Webster's *Third*, complains of those who fail to bow down to facts made "true" by the delectable science of lexicography: "One would think that a person trained to teach and to put knowledge above ignorance and prejudice would, when shown demonstrably true facts objectively gathered and easily verifiable, accept the evidence and ask why he had not realized its significance before" ("Lexicography and the Teacher of English," *CE*, XXV (February, 1964), 349).

The Third Law of Trivia can now be enunciated: "Don't think about it, research it." For example:

> Our Council, directly and through its commissions and workshops, must concern itself with American English at all levels: (1) the training of scholars who can do basic research; (2) the sponsoring of basic research; (3) the interpretation of basic research in pedagogically viable materials; (4) the training of classroom teachers who can use those materials. In recent years we have done a great deal in the last category, and something in the third; demand will sooner or later achieve the first, if we do not use up all our seed corn. The second, the basic research, is lagging, and is our greatest challenge. If we view our language in anthropological terms as a system of arbitrary vocal signals by means of which a social group cooperate and interact and transmit their culture, the opportunities are endless. (Raven McDavid, "American English," *CE*, XXV (February, 1964), 335.)

One is reminded of Stephen Leacock's hero, who "flung himself upon his horse and rode madly off in all directions."

With a recognition of the science-research syndrome, this history is brought up to date. The United States Government has got into the act, and we may be sure that Freshman English is about to be declared a Distressed Area and that President Johnson will shortly begin a War on Poverty of Knowledge about Composition. Already, the government, along with the NCTE, has supported the report by Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer, *Research in Written Composition* (NCTE, 1963). In this report, the door to academic busywork is pushed wide open: "If little has been proved about the instructional factors influencing composition, it is fair to say that almost nothing has been proved in a scientific sense about the rhetorical aspects of written composition" (p. 38).

To reach gloomy conclusions like the above cost the taxpayers $18,000. But *Research in Written Composition* is an excellent job of its kind. Cleanly written and organized, it is valuable to the profession because it demonstrates once and for all that "research" of the pseudo-scientific type can tell us little of value about writing. *Research in Written Composition* should be the first and last of its series. Project English, however—like most government-inspired institutions—probably will go on forever, and the American taxpayer can expect many more studies like the one reported in *Project English Newsletter* (October, 1963), p. 3: "019—Quantitative Analyses of Endogenous and Exogenous Children in Some Reading Processes."[5]

Before leaving the subject of research, I should perhaps mention one characteristic that makes it particularly useful to purveyors of nonsense. As stated in the Fourth Law of Trivia: "If you can just research the problem, you don't have to act on it and maybe it will go away." A number of us, when we were young instructors, used to amuse ourselves in staff meetings by asking a skillist administrator what we should do about certain problems. "What shall we do about plagiarism?" someone would ask. "Well, now that *is* a problem," the administrator would answer, and then he would talk for thirty minutes about how big a problem it was, and how research was needed into the psychology of students who committed plagiarism. He would conclude by saying that it certainly was a problem and that he would appoint a committee to investigate it.

[5] Harold Allen claims that "Project English will kill the traditional [Freshman English] course" (*CCC*, XIV [December, 1963], 133). It is too soon to tell. Maybe the Endogenous and Exogenous Children will break their fetters, turn on their creators, and kill Project English. If you play at being a Frankenstein, you never dare turn your back on your own monsters.

The committee met, investigated, and reported to the department that the whole affair required further thinking, testing, and maybe some "pre-planning." At last report, the committee was still pre-planning and the students were still copying their themes from *Look*, *Life*, and each other.

III

The Fifth Law of Trivia states: "Theologies of dogma and nonsense, as produced in the composition course, are infinite in number and are infinitely changeable."[6] In a recent (1964) informal study of the freshman programs of about 1000 colleges and universities, it was discovered that semanticists, skillists, and linguisticians are now influencing only about five percent of the freshman courses. For all practical purposes the old dogmas in the theology of communication are dead—Project English is too young to have much influence yet.

What will the new dogma be? The ordinary composition teacher will not produce it because life in the great world, as he knows it and as it is reflected in his students' compositions, is too complex, varied, rich, and interesting for dogma to get a foothold in his mind. He is too busy working—teaching and grading papers—to preach up and down the halls of NCTE meetings. Besides, he asks, what is known of fundamental importance about the teaching of writing that was not known to the teachers of Hemingway, Horace, and Homer? (To what extent were they self-taught?) The world, it is the old world yet.

According to the informal study mentioned above, the big swing in freshman courses is to literature, and undoubtedly the new dogmas will come from the symbol hunters and other disciples of the New Criticism. After teaching his first freshman class this morning, my office mate entered our office with a Boswellian flourish and announced: "*I have Brooks-and-Warrenized the land!* I spoke to the class of symbol and tone, of functional foreshadowing and tension and irony (three kinds), of mood and myth, of sentimentalism (how terrible), of tragic efflorescence, and of allegories along the Nile." He struck a pose and added: "Tomorrow they will hand in a theme on the symbolism of clothes in *Hamlet* and *Death of a Salesman*."

It's going to be mighty critico-literary hereabouts—until the next delusion comes along.

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[6] The latest ploy by the linguisticians is one that operates according to Goldwater's Theorem: "Say loudly that the thing you said you never said in the first place; this is what you *meant* when you said what you didn't say." In the October (1964) issue of *College English*, W. N. Francis lists certain familiar dogmas of linguistics and then states: "Here are eight specific doctrines attributed to American structural linguists. Every single one of them is wrong; I know no linguist who would subscribe to any of them, and the work of most of those I know refutes them seriatim and *in toto*" ("Language and Linguistics in the English Program," 13-14).

What Is Technical Writing?

W. EARL BRITTON

ALTHOUGH THE DEAN of an engineering college once denied the very existence of technical writing, many of us are confident of its reality. But we are not sure that we can convince others of its uniqueness. This uncertainty deepens when we observe the variety of activities incorporated under this label, as well as those that barely elude its scope. Our schools do little to clarify the situation with such course titles as technical writing, engineering writing, engineering English, scientific English, scientific communications, and report writing. Nor do the national societies help with their emphasis upon medical writing, biological writing, science writing, and business English. Applying the general term *technical writing* to a field of such diversified activities is convenient but misleading, yet this is the current practice. In view of the confusion, there is little wonder that a teacher in this field should often be asked, even by colleagues, "What is this technical writing you teach, and how does it differ from any other?"

In addition to satisfying this query, a truly helpful definition should go much further and illuminate the tasks of both the teachers and authors of technical writing. This requirement has been fulfilled in varying degrees by a number of definitions already advanced, the most significant of which form four categories.

Technical writing is most commonly defined by its subject matter. Blickle and Passe say:

> Any attempt . . . to define technical writing is complicated by the recognition that exposition is often creative. Because technical writing often employs some of the devices of imaginative writing, a broad definition is necessary. Defined broadly, technical writing is that writing which deals with subject matter in science, engineering, and business.[1]

Mills and Walter likewise note that technical writing is "concerned with technical subject matter," but admit the difficulty of saying precisely what a technical subject is. For their own purpose in writing a textbook, they call a technical subject one that falls within science and engineering. They elaborate their view by adding four large characteristics of the form: namely, its concern with scientific and technical matters, its use of a scientific vocabulary and conventional report forms, its commitment to objectivity and accuracy, and the complexity of its task, involving descriptions, classifications, and even more intricate problems.[2]

The second approach is linguistic, as illustrated in an article by Robert Hays, who, admitting the existence of technical writing without actually defining it, remarks upon its conservativeness, its Teutonic subject-verb-object word order, and the fact that it shares with other forms of writing the "common" English vocabulary. However, he cites two fundamental differences between technical and other prose. The psychological difference is the writer's "attitude of utter seriousness" toward his subject, and his dedication to facts and strict objectivity. But the greater difference, at least for "teachers and students of technical writing, is linguistic," in that technical style demands a "specialized vocabulary, especially in its adjectives and nouns."[3]

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[1] *Readings for Technical Writers*, ed. Margaret D. Blickle and Martha E. Passe (New York, 1963), p. 3.

[2] Gordon H. Mills and John A. Walter, *Technical Writing* (New York, 1954), pp. 3-5.

[3] Robert Hays, "What is Technical Writing?" *Word Study*, April, 1961, p. 2.

The third definition concentrates on the type of thought process involved. This approach underlies some of the research being directed by A. J. Kirkman, of the Welsh College of Advanced Technology in Cardiff, who has been investigating the causes of unsatisfactory scientific and technical writing. His group is examining in particular the suggestion that a distinction exists between ways of thinking and writing about literary and scientific subjects. The theory postulates two types of thinking, each with its own mode of expression. Associative thought belongs to history, literature, and the arts. Statements are linked together by connectives like *then* and *rather,* indicating chronological, spatial, or emotional relationships. Sequential thought belongs to mathematics and science. Statements are connected by words like *because* and *therefore,* revealing a tightly logical sequence. Professor Kirkman suggests that the weakness of much scientific writing results from forcing upon scientific material the mode of expression appropriate to the arts. He adds:

> The important distinction is that sequential contexts call for comparatively inflexible lines of thought and rigid, impersonal forms of expression, whereas associative contexts permit random and diverse patterns of thought which can be variously expressed.[4]

Finally, technical writing is sometimes defined by its purpose. This approach rests upon the familiar differentiation between imaginative and expository prose, between DeQuincey's literature of power and literature of knowledge. Brooks and Warren find the primary advantage of the scientific statement to be that of "absolute precision." They contend that literature in general also represents a "specialization of language for the purpose of precision" but add that it "aims at treating kinds of material different from those of science," particularly attitudes, feelings, and interpretations.[5]

Reginald Kapp pursues a similar line by dividing writing into imaginative and functional literature. Imaginative literature involves personal response and is evocative; functional literature concerns the outer world that all can see. Functional English, he says, presents "all kinds of facts, of inferences, arguments, ideas, lines of reasoning. Their essential feature is that they are new to the person addressed." If imaginative literature attempts to control men's souls, functional English should control their minds. As he writes, the technical and scientific author "confers on the words the power to make those who read think as he wills it."[6]

All of these approaches are significant and useful. Kirkman's suggestions are certainly intriguing, but I find Kapp's classification particularly helpful and want to extend it slightly.

I should like to propose that the primary, though certainly not the sole, characteristic of technical and scientific writing lies in the effort of the author to convey one meaning and only one meaning in what he says. That one meaning must be sharp, clear, precise. And the reader must be given no choice of meanings; he must not be allowed to interpret a passage in any way but that intended by the writer. Insofar as the reader may derive more than one meaning from a passage, technical writing is bad; insofar as he can derive only one meaning from the writing, it is good.

Imaginative writing—and I choose it

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[4] A. J. Kirkman, "The Communication of Technical Thought," *The Chartered Mechanical Engineer,* December, 1963, p. [2].

[5] Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Poetry,* 3rd ed. (New York, 1960), pp. 4-5.

[6] Reginald O. Kapp, *The Presentation of Technical Information* (New York, 1957), chaps. I-II.

because it offers the sharpest contrast—can be just the opposite. There is no necessity that a poem or play convey identical meanings to all readers, although it may. Nor need a poem or play have multiple meanings. The fact remains, nevertheless, that a work of literature may mean different things to different readers, even at different times. Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* has been interpreted by some as an attack on romanticism, and in just the opposite way by others who read it as an attack on realism. Yet no one seems to think the less of the novel. Makers of the recent film of *Tom Jones* saw in the novel a bedroom farce, whereas serious students of Fielding have always regarded it as an effort to render goodness attractive. Varied interpretations of a work of literature may add to its universality, whereas more than one interpretation of a piece of scientific and technical writing would render it useless.

When we enter the world of pure symbol, the difference between the two kinds of communication—scientific and aesthetic—becomes more pronounced. Technical and scientific writing can be likened to a bugle call, imaginative literature to a symphony. The bugle call conveys a precise message: get up, come to mess, retire. And all for whom it is blown derive identical meanings. It can mean only what was intended. But a symphony, whatever the intention of the composer, will mean different things to different listeners, at different times, and especially as directed by different conductors. A precise meaning is essential and indispensable in a bugle call; it is not necessarily even desirable in a symphony.

The analogy can be extended. Even though the bugle call is a precise communication, it can be sounded in a variety of styles. An able musician can play taps with such feeling as to induce tears, and it is conceivable that a magician might blow reveille so as to awaken us in a spirit of gladness. The fact that scientific writing is designed to convey precisely and economically a single meaning does not require that its style be flat and drab. Even objectivity and detachment can be made attractive.

Because technical writing endeavors to convey just one meaning, its success, unlike that of imaginative literature, is measureable. As far as I am aware, there is no means of determining precisely the effects of a poem or a symphony; but scientific analyses and descriptions, instructions, and accounts of investigations quickly reveal any communication faults by the inability of the reader to comprehend and carry on.

Objection may be raised to this distinction between the two kinds of writing because it makes for such large and broad divisions. This I readily admit, at the same time that I hold this feature to be a decided advantage, in that it removes the difficulty that usually arises when technical writing is defined by its subject matter.

Emphasis upon engineering subject matter in technical writing, for example, has implied that engineering has a monopoly on the form, and that a PhD dissertation in linguistics or even certain kinds of literary criticism and a study of federal economic policy are other kinds of writing When all such endeavors that convey single meanings are grouped under the label technical and scientific writing, or some other term, for that matter, then division of these into subject areas, instead of creating confusion, becomes meaningful. Some subjects will be far more technological than others, ranging from dietetics to nuclear fission, and in some instances being related to science only by method of approach; some subjects will offer more linguistic difficulty than others; some will require a tighter, more sequential mode of thinking; but all will have in common the

essential effort to limit the reader to one interpretation.

It seems to me that this view not only illuminates the nature of technical writing but also emphasizes the kind of training required of our schools. Unfortunately, few educational institutions are meeting the needs in this field. Professor Kirkman mentions the failure of the traditional teachers to provide enough practice in writing on practical subjects. Professor Kapp has insisted that the conventional instruction in formal English courses does not equip a man to teach or practice scientific and technical writing. The Shakespearian scholar, G. B. Harrison, commenting upon his formal writing courses in England, says:

> The most effective elementary training I ever received was not from masters at school but in composing daily orders and instructions as staff captain in charge of the administration of seventy-two miscellaneous military units. It is far easier to discuss Hamlet's complexes than to write orders which ensure that five working parties from five different units arrive at the right place at the right time equipped with proper tools for the job. *One soon learns that the most seemingly simple statement can bear two meanings* and that when instructions are misunderstood the fault usually lies with the wording of the original order.[7] [My italics]

But our strictures should not be confined to the English teachers. All of us in education must share the responsibility for this condition. In fact, I believe that in all too many instances, at least in college, the student writes the wrong thing, for the wrong reason, to the wrong person, who evaluates it on the wrong basis. That is, he writes about a subject he is not thoroughly informed upon, in order to exhibit his knowledge rather than explain something the reader does not understand, and he writes to a professor who already knows more than he does about the matter and who evaluates the paper, not in terms of what he has derived, but in terms of what he thinks the writer knows. In every respect, this is the converse of what happens in professional life, where the writer is the authority; he writes to transmit new or unfamiliar information to someone who does not know but needs to, and who evaluates the paper in terms of what he derives and understands.

B. C. Brookes takes a similar position when he suggests that English teachers concerned with science students should ask them occasionally to explain aspects of their work which they know well so that the teacher who is unacquainted with the material will understand it. Such an assignment not only is a real exercise in composition but also taxes the imagination of the student in devising illuminating analogies for effective communication. The teacher's theme should be: "If your paper is not plain and logical to me, then it is not good *science*."[8]

Both Harrison and Brookes recommend the kinds of exercises that are often viewed skeptically at the college level. This is a regrettable attitude, especially since it usually derives from unfamiliarity with the nature and need of such work and from unawareness of its difficulty and challenge. Teachers oriented primarily toward literature see little of interest in this field, but those who enjoy composition—especially its communicative aspect—can find considerable satisfaction here. Of one thing they can always be sure: deep gratitude from those they help.

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[7] G. B. Harrison, *Profession of English* (New York, 1962), p. 149.

[8] B. C. Brookes, "The Teaching of English to Scientists and Engineers," *The Teaching of English*, Studies in Communication 3 (London, 1959), pp. 146-7.